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Toughness pervades Lamorinda boys basketball

By Jon Kingdon

Acalanes Coach Sol Henik came into the season with a unique roster comprising 12 seniors and two juniors. Says Henik: "I've never experienced this before. It's great to have so much leadership and experience on the team. The seniors all care because they realize that this is their last year. We are a gritty team, a team of grinders."

The Dons have a record of 12-4 entering into their league schedule.

The experience has become crucial as the team has lost two key players for the season due to injuries. Mitchell Smith, who was second team all-league last season, suffered a severe knee injury during tryouts and co-captain Carson Etnyre recently suffered a stress fracture in his foot.

With four players on the team that also played football for Acalanes, there is an unusual toughness to this basketball team. "Our football players, Robbie Rowell, Ryan Nall, Aiden McNamara and Nick Price bring that physical mentality to the court," says Henik. "They have the tools, the intangible skills and winning mentality to not back down."

Henik has come to rely on point guard Ian Archer on the court: "Ian has turned into a leader. Though not that big, he is very tough and is not afraid to show his emotion on the floor. He's even the second leading rebounder on the team."

The Dons have relied on their defense. According to Henik, "Our defense is our strength. Nall is the best help side defender I've ever coached. He is our last line of defense. He alters shots and boxes out well. He is blessed with great vision and anticipation on the floor. Rowell and Archer mix it up well and get after the ball. McNamara brings great basketball instincts to our defense. He leads the team in deflections and steals. He wants to guard our opponent's best player."

Acalanes runs a disciplined, half court offense to complement the team's defense. Says Henik: "Our offensive style is to run a good, half-court offense. If we can hit our open shots, it gives us the best opportunity to win. We just need to stay focused. We're not the quickest team and we need to dictate the pace and tempo to favor our style of play."

Campolindo lost a lot of height to graduation with Chris Wright, now playing at Dartmouth and freshman Hunter Clarke, who returned to Australia to play for their national team. Head coach Steven Dyer knew his squad was going to be very different from last year's team: "We're quicker than we were last year. Without real height, we need to rebound by committee. This is a mentally tough team. We've played in a lot of close games and held up well. We've been good in the fourth quarter in close games." Heading into league play with a 12-4 record, the Cougars have proven to be a tough out this season.

With a balanced mixture of seniors, juniors and sophomores, the Cougars have brought a combination of maturity and youth to the team. Leading the way on the floor is sophomore Carter Mahaney. Having played varsity as a freshman, Mahaney has taken great strides this season. Says Dyer: "Carter put in a great deal of effort in the off-season. He has blossomed into an elite player who only needs to focus more on his defensive game."

Dyer relies strongly as well on senior guard Trevin Kroichik: "Trevin's the glue that holds the team together on offense and defense. He the most consistent player we have in

a lot of areas." Evidencing this is the fact that Kroichik is leading the team in steals and assists. The team's three leading scorers, Mahaney, Kroichik and guard David Ahazie, are all averaging in double figures.

The omnipresent John Torchio, the team's leading rebounder, came off a football season having played 15 games on offense and defense. When offered by Dyer to take a week off to recover, Torchio took all of one day and returned to the team, providing much needed strength on the boards. Says Dyer: "John's a great athlete and is leading the team in rebounding. He is really mentally focused this year and things have really clicked for him."

Heading into league play, Dyer wants to continue to see improvement in his team: "Defense is an area where we can always improve. We're not as good there as we were last year, though we do have a lot of quickness on the perimeter."

Coming into his second season, Miramonte head coach Wayne Hunter welcomed back a veteran team with six seniors, six juniors and a sophomore. Displaying great offensive skills and at the behest of his players, Hunter brought up freshman guard Niyi Olabode to the varsity. Olabode's shooting skills have provided a spark to the Matador's offense and a foundation for the team's future. Recent transfer from Salesian, senior guard Brandon Betson is also being counted on to provide additional depth on offense.

Coming into league play with a 9-7 record, Hunter sees the positives in battling against top competition: "By beating Tamalpais, after losing to them last season, we learned that we can play with the best and the rest. We will compete in all games and give a consistently strong effort. We're a hungry team and we have not yet hit our peak."

There is no shortage of leaders on the Matadors. Junior point guard, Jayson Fernbacher, a co-captain has taken on that role on the floor. According to Hunter, "Jason runs the show. He's a leader in games and practice. He loves the game, puts the time in and is not afraid to jump on his teammates. He's all in." Senior forward and co-captain Andrew Logan has proven to be a leader by example. Says Hunter: "Andrew is very consistent from game to game and from practice to practice. He gives his all, all the time."

As with Acalanes, the Miramonte team has suffered some key injuries. Senior power forward Enzo Jiannalone is still recovering from an ACL injury suffered last season and should continue to improve and contribute to the team. Senior guard/wing co-captain Nikhail Shastri is returning from a torn meniscus and has been missed. According to Hunter, "Nikhail loves the game and is a real leader and we miss his ability to play both guard and wing."

Relying on their shooting and a strong half-court defense is what Hunter is counting on as the season progresses: "We are looking for overall consistency and effort as a unit. We all need to prepare the same. We are strong when we prepare together."

The one constant each coach can agree on is the talent that pervades the league this year.

Coach Dyer understands the challenge his team faces as league play has begun: "In all the years that I have been associated with Campolindo, as a player and as a coach, this is the strongest the league has ever been. Every game is going to be a battle and we can't afford to overlook anyone."



Ethan Fox

Photos Gint Federas

Coach Hunter shares those thoughts: "There are no easy games. I love the league. There are great coaches here and it's excellent to go against these guys. It's a good way to get battle tested"

Coach Henik echoes those sentiments: "This is a brutal league. Every team has a chance to win the league title. There are no nights off. It's a great opportunity and a real challenge for each game."

It will only get more interesting as the teams enter league play.



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